

Di An, South Vietnam
Hdqs 1st Inf Div
23 Nov, 1965

Dear Vince:

I apologize for my extended writer's cramp. Since returning from the States on 11 October I haven't had a spare hour - literally. Found out on my return that Mr. Mann (USOM Director) wanted me to take a new job as the USOM Representative with the US Forces in the 11 province area surrounding Saigon. I was most disappointed to leave Hau Nghia - particularly when I was beginning to realize some tangible evidence of my eight months there. Hau Nghia still represents close to the poorest security situation in South Vietnam's 43 provinces - but is close to the top in the USOM programs and in the utilization of the AID-financed reconstruction budget - having obligated 88% of its annual budget against a country-wide average of about 40%. Selfishly, also, I had made close friends of the Province Chief and his family, and with a number of officials and citizens at lower levels - so I probably was and am quite biased about wanting to remain there.

Wound up in Hau Nghia the end of October, made arrangements for my assistant, Doug Ramsey, to be made acting province rep (to forestall a permanent rep being assigned - and in hopes I could return after getting this job established), and reported in to General (Maj Gen) Jonathan Seaman, CG of 1st Inf Div, on 1 November. Having served with the 1st Division's 16th Infantry in Germany, I was welcomed as a bona-fide member of the "Big Red One". The Chief of Staff had a tent set up for me in the Headquarters area; I was made a member of the General's Mess; invited to all briefings; authorized access to the Division Tactical Operations Center; and given access to helicopter transportation as desired. My specific mission is to act as a civilian advisor to the senior US military commander in the III Corps area, and to provide liaison with the governmental agencies and with our civilian advisory teams in each province.

The major argument advanced by my superiors for me to take this job was that my military background in South Vietnam would enable me to gain acceptance more easily than most other USOM personnel. I think they were correct in this. As it turns out, none of the Generals or key G' staff personnel have previously served in Vietnam, and I have probably been queried more on military matters than on civilian ones. One of the G's stated to me that "we are getting a counterinsurgency lesson from you at each meal". Individually, each of the three Generals and 2 of the 4 Brigade Commanders have invited me in to their quarters for lengthy conversations on the war, this country, and its people. Altogether, we have about 25,000 US troops (tactical ones - many additional thousands of support troops) in this zone, to include the 173rd Airborne Brigade which is also under General Seaman's command.

During the past three weeks I have traveled extensively throughout the corps area. I insisted upon, and received, an unmarked civilian sedan (a white 1962 Falcon) that permits me to travel roads that Americans haven't been on for years. This has permitted me to visit all US units and nine of the eleven provinces - and gives me a freedom of movement and action that will soon result in my becoming the best informed American in this area. An added advantage is that many of the US units are commanded by old friends, and several of the provinces are advised by former associates or subordinates. Also, my views and past experience here are generally known and endorsed by field personnel - so I get some pretty frank evaluations and answers. I concentrate on the US military units and their activities during the week, and visit Advisory teams and USOM Reps on the weekends (since they are less busy during these

periods when GVN closes shop).

I have observed our US troops on some operations, but have not yet managed to be with them during full-scale enemy contact. My information on their combat performance is second-hand, but from highly valid sources. I'll start with a brief rundown on the activities of the command group. I am very favorably impressed. The division sent its 2nd Brigade over in July and followed with the rest of the elements in October, closing its tail in to present location on 11 November. I joined them in a staging area on the Bien Hoa highway on 1 Nov and moved with them on 9 November to an isolated, open area on the boundary between Binh Duong and Bien Hoa provinces, just within the Bien Hoa Province. They set up excellent perimeters at both locations, established themselves in tents, observe blackout conditions, and have ambush and reconnaissance patrols out each night. There are a total of six TAOR's (Tactical Areas of Operating Responsibility) spread through (but not over) several provinces. Within the assigned TAOR, the US unit operates pretty much independently, but even here requires some Vietnamese (usually combat police) to be with each unit to advise on the population problems. The US units operate outside their TAOR's only on order of MACV - and normally in coordination with GVN units. I believe we are in a transition period of trying to determine just what the relationships between GVN and US Commanders will be; one possible solution that is under consideration is to make the senior US officer in a Corps area the "Senior Advisor" to the GVN Corps Commander. Above Brigade level there is no reluctance to place US troops under a Vietnamese Commander, and vice versa. To my knowledge no US unit smaller than a Brigade (three battalions and supporting troops) ~~has~~ has been placed under Vietnamese command, and for all practical purposes, command above Brigade level in this war is thus far is more for administrative convenience than for actual control.

Two very significant combat actions have occurred this month. In one operation between 5-10 November, the combat experienced (six months in SVN) 173rd Airborne Brigade had one battalion of its forces engaged in the southeast corner of Zone D. The action started with a platoon making contact with an estimated VC battalion. Although the VC battalion knew there was a sizable US force in the area, they decided to eliminate the platoon. While organizing for an attack on the platoon, the VC delayed long enough that the platoon was reinforced to company strength. The VC made several charges and were annihilated on each charge. Subsequently as the rest of the US battalion closed in, the VC attempted to retreat while under air and artillery (observed and adjusted) attack, and under pursuit. The total claimed body count was 417 versus 52 US deaths and 123 wounded. In fact, the body count of the VC was exaggerated (due to normal reporting errors and redundancies) but probably exceeded 225. The second action involved the 2nd Battalion, Second Infantry on the 12th of November and was their first real fight. They were in a linear deployment providing road security over approximately 8 KM's of Highway 13 just north of Ben Cat, and waiting for the ARVN 7th Regiment to pass thru. There was a delay in the movement of the 7th Regt and the road security mission continued into a second day. The VC launched an attack against the elements at the north end of the road deployment, surprising them to some extent with a coordinated mortar and Infantry assault at 0615 - shortly before daylight. The battalion commander immediately folded the forces not under attack in to the action area, and also received support from an Armored (M-113) US Company. In the course of the counter-attack, we lost 11 M-113's to recoilless rifle fire (5 destroyed and 6 badly damaged, had total friendly casualties of 20 killed and 73 wounded, and a fairly accurate body count of 146 VC (as opposed to an "estimate" of enemy dead of 320 - the latter figure being erroneously reported in news media as a "US ~~xxx~~ verified body count.)

The significance of the two actions I described, in my opinion, is as follows:

- a. Both actions were at the discretion of the Viet Cong; the VC normally do not accept battle except when they believe they hold the trump cards.
- b. VC units were main force and were meeting US troops for the first time.
- c. VC actions were characterized by almost suicidal charges in attempts to overrun the US positions.
- d. By all reports the US units performed well, including the combat-green 2/2.
- e. The VC apparently were counting on a performance similar to that which is normal to ARVN units, i.e: absence of aimed rifle fire; failure to react immediately (while waiting for decisions from higher echelons miles away in distance and hours in time); delay in calling in supporting artillery and air; failure to use fire and maneuver; failure to maintain contact and to pursue; and almost total chaos when unit commander(s) become casualties.

Quite obviously the Viet Cong did not expect the type of fighting they ran into. To a certain extent, the Viet Cong may have been "spoiled" by their years of easy victories over an inept ARVN, and this may precipitate a decision by their top commanders to avoid "conventional" actions and return to the guerilla warfare they have done so successfully. From a military consideration, this would greatly complicate the US job here, but could provide a breathing space for GVN to seize the initiative

3 Dec 1965

Vince: Again apologize. Many activities between then and now. Thanks for your note of Nov 26th and the enclosed article. You are still making yourself vulnerable to charges of "fence straddling" on the political scene - but with good justification.

By now you must have read of the VC attack on the 7th ARVN Regiment in the Michelin Plantation area. It occurred the morning of 27 November, and just two days prior to a McNamara visit. I understand from reliable sources that he was furious at such a defeat occurring - particularly at this time. A little background: It started as a joint US (1st Div) GVN operation with the US portion being completed on 23 Nov and the troops being withdrawn. ARVN was to stay in the area to get the rubber plantation working again, to screen the 8-10,000 civilian population, and to begin pacification of the area. Since 8 out of the 10 advisors with the 7th Regt were killed (the other two seriously wounded and evacuated) our info on what happened is quite sketchy. Quite obviously all the deficiencies I listed above (this page) were evident, and the US Forces were not even aware of the 0615 surprise attack until 1245 that day. By then the enemy (estimated at 2 Regiments by ARVN - but probably between 1 and 2 battalions) had evaporated into the very heavy jungle that surrounds the plantation (NW corner of Binh Duong Province) and the US reaction force failed to establish contact (old story). Even today, General Seaman remarked that III ARVN Corps has not yet told him the friendly casualties or weapon losses. (I found out thru my Viet sources at Corps that the casualties were approximately 350 dead, 325 wounded, and over 700 weapons lost). Part of the difficulty of separating fact from fiction is evident in the following conversation between General Seaman and Colonel Glasgow, the Div Chief of Staff: Gen S: Col Tuan, the 5th Div Cmdr, told me he had personally counted over 300

VC bodies in the area of the attack. Col G: That's funny; Colonel MacDonald, his Senior Advisor who was with him, told me he hadn't seen a single VC body. End of quote. General consensus is that total surprise was achieved and that the Regimental CP and one battalion were overrun literally without the friendlies fighting back. In a one hour period, the enemy did more military damage to us (GVN) than the entire 1st Div has done to the enemy in the past two months. It is a shame - it is events like this that have caused me to take the position that these little gentlemen are too much the victims of their own past mistakes, and cannot rise above them - hence we must take over. I don't know how much more of this must occur until some of the big boys come to the same conclusions.

As you are aware, I am deeply concerned that, even if we are militarily successful, we are likely to lose in the long run unless we cause the GVN to become oriented toward its rural population, and to develop the sort of a government that can win support of the people. Regretfully, I do not yet see any progress in this area. The Ky government is considered as corrupt and inept as its predecessors; indeed, it is my opinion that corruption has never occurred on the scale and in as open a fashion as it now does. During a recent visit to Long Khanh province I picked up the following quotations dealing with Lt Col Tran Van Do, the Province Chief, and his area:

- a. I estimate he has made over a million dollars (US) during his two years as province chief. He is in the lumber business with the Saigon merchants and the local VC.
- b. The VC daily operate a tax collection point on the highway (22) in the northeast corner of the province. They do it with full knowledge (and we believe consent) of the province chief and his staff. They collect an average of three million piastres a month at this checkpoint. It is only 6 KM's east of a government post where there are two companies and the road is open. Ofttimes there are up to 90 lumber and rubber trucks lined up; we see them from our observation aircraft. When we finally disguised two trucks with soldiers inside and went up to trap them, three of the soldiers (we believe on order) leaped out of the trucks before we were all the way to the checkpoint, and raced up firing submachine guns at a range of less than 5 meters. All six VC at the tax table jumped up and raced into the woods - unharmed. All we got was 11,000 P's on the table. It was obvious that they had been allowed to escape.
- c. At 2330 on the 27th of Sept the ~~Vietnam~~ Admin office was blown up, allegedly by VC. The next morning at 0730 I watched them shovel up all the provincial records, most of which were undamaged, and load them in a truck. I asked where they were taking them. They replied they were ordered by the Deputy to burn them because they were damaged. I objected, but they burned them anyhow. I believe the PC wanted the records of his administration destroyed.
- d. Oh, Yes. GVN does go on patrols at night. You can tell where they set their ambushes up by the rope marks of the hammocks on the trees. At 0330 on the 16th of October, one ambush squad of 12 men lost 12 carbines - the VC took them while they were asleep - but did not harm them.

On the B-52 bomb strikes, I get the general complaint from field advisors that the strikes are normally based on outdated intelligence and seldom get real results. A direct quote from one sector advisor follows: "We checked three of the strikes. On the first we found trees blown down and many new fish ponds. Same on the 2nd, plus two bodies that could not be identified. Same on the third except we got real results; found a box with a hundred brassieres and a hundred panties in it". From his province chief, the following direct quote: "The B-52 strikes do a lot of good. Not

militarily, of course. But they are of much psychological value; all the people are awed by the huge explosions. Yes, I would say they are good psychological warfare weapons, but they are expensive".

5 December

Another break. I have been alerted to expect another change of assignment. Apparently the new Deputy Minister of Rural Construction, Colonel Tran Ngoc Chau, has gone personally to Mr. Mann, USOM Director, and requested that I be assigned as his principal advisor. Chau was one of my Province Chiefs in the Delta and is currently charged with the development of a single, national cadre program, to replace the multiplicity of programs now in existence. This was one of the recommendations of my September paper; coincidentally a paper I coordinated with Chau while he was still the Kien Hoa Province Chief. If this change of assignment does take place, I will be pleased. This would permit me to travel countrywide and to get a feel for the situation in the northern and central areas that I've never before had the opportunity to secure.

Later-----

There are so many more things I had wanted to write to you - but I am continually interrupted. Therefore, I'll close this and get it on the way - and continue later.

Mary Jane hasn't sent the Post article yet - but I'm looking forward to it. My fondest to Ann and the children. Know you must be looking forward to the Xmas break, but know also that you will have every hour of it planned before it starts.

Never did receive the article from your Air Force friend at the academy. Have you read Fall's article in 9 Oct issue of New Republic? Just remembered - you have and loaned it to me. Reviewed it again recently. In only one area is it off base - that is the paragraph relating population density in the Delta to B-52 raids there. It is a little misleading in that it implies the B-52 raids in that area took place in highly populated locations; actually (thankfully) all the raids have taken place in dense jungle or on the isolated Plain of Reeds. Of course, this means that there have probably been damned few VC hit - which may still be preferable to using the bombs where there are more VC and more people.

Two final items: Lodge and Washington (I understand from people close to both) are becoming concerned about the corruption issue. This is significant in that the previous attitude (my opinion) has been that corruption is to be expected and should not be made an issue. Unfortunately, the latter reasoning is not shared by the communists; they do make it an issue, and their own operations have convinced many of the peasants that they are not individually corrupt. Second item: I am delighted to note the growing awareness among military leaders of the need to avoid casualties among the civilian population.

Best regards,

John